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Reflections from a Pre-Service Teacher: Finding Equity, Accessibility, and Compassion in Our Schools

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Completing this paper from quarantine felt different and disjointed, so I want to thank my parents and friends for providing support and love. I wish that we could celebrate together with drinks at the Duck. Until then, our spirited conversations will continue.

Introduction

An Open Letter

To the Concerned Reader:

I embark on this project as the capstone thesis for the Honor Scholar program at DePauw University. It started as a project-based learning module for middle school students to learn about social justice. But along the way, my adventure was hijacked by all of the other problems I saw in the school system, and specifically at Greencastle Middle School.

The comfort of routine often hides issues that appear obvious to newcomers. Even during my short tenure at the school, my visceral initial reactions to the toxic environment lost their intensity. Within a few months, attitudes from other teachers that used to make me tense and uncomfortable became normal and acceptable. I stopped trying to actively resist them.

The culture at this school sucked out my enthusiasm for teaching. I came home to dinner every day feeling worn and defeated. I resorted to using disciplinary tactics I'd previously shunned. I know that a lot of first-year teachers feel like this. But I can't help but think that they don't have to.

At the end of my time as a student, graduating into a world of uncertainty, I'm staying optimistic and focusing on the future (even though my job options continue to dwindle). I believe that we can use this time to take better care of ourselves and each other, and to recenter what's important in the classroom: the loving relationship between student and teacher. I write this letter to ensure that my voice is valued in the conversation - too often, at every level, school staff make key decisions at a studentless table. Now, many of us have extra time to ask our students who they are, how they are, and what they value.

I'm not sure who this letter is for: aspiring educators, current teachers, administrators, parents, or veterans in the field. Whoever you are, I hope that you share my belief that open, continuous dialogue forms a path to institutional change. It feels strange to summarize my experience this year in a

single paper because my vision continues evolving and expanding, allowing for multiple frameworks and systems of thought. I've shifted my focus from antiracist, social justice pedagogy to trauma-informed and social and emotional learning. Rather than see those as different paths, I choose to view them as connected, a shift in mindset towards community and collectivism. I'm beginning to realize what it feels like to have a life's work and to think systemically. This year I've seen a lot of dead eyes, but I've also seen many snapshots of what a loving teacher-student relationship can look like. I encourage everyone to start by cultivating those kinds of relationships with colleagues, students, and administrators. Above all, I invite anyone who's moved to take part in the conversation.

Beginnings

After spending summer 2019 in Santa Fe and before starting the 2019-2020 school year, I was thrilled to get my own classroom upon graduating from DePauw. I left so many conversations inspired by our mutual passion for teaching and education, filled to the brim with emotions and hopes for the future. I cried, eating away my feelings on lactose-heavy Sonic milkshakes and wet burritos with Christmas chile: I loved my students, I loved my colleagues, and I loved the space we created to empower each other. I sailed out on a cloud of idealism and personal fulfillment.

I knew that not every school has eight-student classrooms, enthusiastic kids, and fresh young teachers, but I felt ideologically armored by my dreamlike summer. I underestimated the pervasive effect of school culture on my outlook and my students' attitudes.

When I got the job at Greencastle Middle School's After School Enrichment Program (ASE), I knew that the children might be the opposite of the idyllic situation in Santa Fe. Whereas my students at Breakthrough had applied because of their high levels of academic achievement and excitement in the classroom, my students at the middle school come to catch up on missing assignments, some of them accruing over 20 each semester. At the ripe age of 12, they have already decided that formal schooling doesn't serve them, so they invest their boundless energy in avoiding assignments and distracting

teachers. The program, meant for enrichment and open to everyone, targets kids in the bottom 20% of their classes (both academically and socioeconomically, though those two groups have heavy overlap).

If Breakthrough cemented my faith in myself as an effective educator, ASE slowly chipped away at that foundation. Many days last semester, I would come home wondering if teaching was truly my profession.

One of my friends started teaching in Milwaukee with Teach for America in August. For the first four months, I heard zero positive reviews. He got no support from the TFA staff, his students didn't respect him, and he worked way too many hours. Now, he has scrounged some positive comments about the salient joys of teaching. "Being a teacher right out of college is hard," he said. "You're 22, and you get no respect from students." Being a first-year teacher *is* hard no matter where you are, and he seems convinced that you'll be a little miserable no matter what.

Luckily, I keep a detailed journal. I can pinpoint the range of weeks during which I turned away from the prospect of graduate school and towards education. During my semester in Argentina, time away from my family coupled with the death of an important person caused me to recalibrate my life plan, and overall, a sense of urgency pushed me towards teaching. Why spend time rotting away in academia, chattering mindlessly at each other about ideas that never really trickle up or trickle down to policy solutions that actually impact struggling people?

Another loss in my personal life brought me to the same standstill on my thesis. What's the point of writing any of this if no one will read it? So my advisor, Beth, suggested that I reframe the paper as an open letter to school administrators. Once I post this on HASTAC, it will be open to the public. Hopefully people can find something valuable in this highly reflective project; maybe they'll recognize some of the same problems in their own schools, and maybe they'll feel moved to make a positive change in school culture. I apologize for the lack of solutions, but I promise to keep searching in the next few years. If anything, navigating these ideas has made me hyper-aware of my underpreparedness for

entering the classroom full-time! But luckily, learning is my favorite thing, so I will continue to explore remedies.

Preview

Policy rules education: federal policy, state policy, corporation policy, and school policy. You cannot change education without changing policy, and you cannot change policy without recognizing its importance. Even the most impassioned young teachers cannot turn around a school system - it takes a community with institutional support. If one under-resourced classroom changes its attitude, that doesn't change the system that created the lack of resources. But in the same way that policy trickles down from nation to state to local corporation, a school's policy and culture sets the tone for all learning that occurs inside its walls.

Case studies on two spaces, Southport Elementary School and Greencastle Middle School, show the omnipresent effects of school culture on the learning environment. At one school, students reject eye contact; at the other, they relish it. The increasingly narrative tone of my essay reveals my struggle with the state of our schools, and the problems and solutions I've witnessed. Reflections from thought leaders like Nietzsche, Freire, and Kendi inspired both my disillusionment with the current system and my unwavering faith in the possibility of improvement. I hope to simultaneously provide a sense of what comes next and inspire a wealth of questions in the field of community focused school policy.

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The Initial Stages

Breakthrough Santa Fe

I came to Breakthrough out of a desire "to work in allyship and dismantle inequitable racial and class systems by addressing the opportunity gap at its source, a desire that started long before my junior year of college. My urban high school was composed of 50-60% students of color, but my honors and AP classes were 80% white, something I never realized until I took my first education class in college" (from

my Breakthrough application essay). That's one glaring omittance on part of my high school education -- I'm sure the students of color in my classes realized that a lot earlier than I did, and my delayed reaction forms a large part of why I care so much about reaching kids at such a young age, but we can get into that later.

When I applied, I doubted that I would get in. For the summer of 2019, I sent out two applications in January: one for Breakthrough Collaborative in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the other for Uncommon Schools in Newark, New Jersey. To my surprise and elation, I got offers from both. I had three days to decide. I made a pros and cons list and agonized over the options. Both programs are designed to counteract the opportunity gap and help first-gen, low-income students of color navigate the path to college. Newark presented a high commitment to hiring career teachers and teachers of color, and paid a competitive salary, but their punitive disciplinary system rubbed me the wrong way. Santa Fe, on the other hand, hired diverse teachers from across disciplines, and paid a considerably smaller stipend, but emphasized a warm, loving community in all of my conversations with them. A mentor professor at DePauw advised that I go with what felt right, and if something felt icky, then I shouldn't commit to it. I'm sure that either program would've been a great fit for me, but at multiple points throughout the summer, I mentally thanked Beth for pushing me to choose Santa Fe over Newark.

As May ended and June began, my hesitations about Breakthrough rose to the surface. Mainly, I feared that I was stepping way too far out of my lane: I knew nothing about New Mexico (I'd never even been there), and what business did an upper middle-class white girl from the Midwest have teaching to low-income, first-gen brown kids so far outside of her community? It felt ethically shady. And even though I established amazing relationships, felt very appreciated, and did important work there, it still feels ethically shady. This summer confirmed my belief that if I want to teach in an anti-racist,

justice-oriented way, I'll have to do so in a community that I know well, one to which I already belong. Otherwise, I'm inserting myself in a space that has no need for me.

Though I was working in Santa Fe, Breakthrough Collaborative has sites all over the United States. According to their website, their mission is twofold: to "1) increase academic opportunity for highly motivated, underserved students and get them into college ready to succeed; and 2) inspire and develop the next generation of teachers and educational leaders" (BT website). Their skills-based approach to learning meant that in six weeks, we tried to make up for knowledge that the students might have missed during the school year, hoping to catch them up to their more privileged peers. It might not be the case in all Breakthrough programs, but the director of the Santa Fe site estimated the acceptance rate at around 25%. The program directors select students based on test scores, personal recommendations, and family connections. An involved application process required motivation from both students and parents. Thus, the kids participating already succeeded in school through their test scores in both math and reading, and the opportunity certainly wasn't open to everyone.

In the spring semester of my junior year, I spent a lot of time thinking about project-based and experiential learning, and the value of that model for students. During orientation week at Breakthrough, we looked at data which showed that skills-based learning, not project-based learning, facilitated the highest test scores and most improvement for students, especially low-income students. Working upon this assumption, they structured their curriculum to support student achievement in standardized testing and common core standards.

As a writing teacher, I planned lessons to demonstrate the tools of effective expository and personal writing. Together the other teaching fellows and our instructional coach discussed the writing education we'd had. Some center student creativity — that's the "write from your heart and it'll be beautiful" mentality — which promotes success in privileged students who already read and understand the coded language of academic writing. We strived instead to help our students develop concrete skills

to be effective writers. Thus, we broke essays and paragraphs down sentence-by-sentence. They wrote about actual events, whether historical or personal. And many of them improved immensely in their expository writing, in the sense that they would've earned high scores on a timed, standardized writing sample. Their mock college essays were wonderful too — I was amazed at how easy personal essay writing became when we just had a few ground rules — and many of their 8th grade essays turned out better than mine as a high school senior!

So they persuaded me that skills-based writing was the way to go — at least to start. But the more creative students who already had those techniques down didn't have much room to grow, and they asked for less tethered templates. Overall, though, these students will be much better-served in their public school systems because of the skills-based curriculum. Before their final exam, a timed essay, I gave them my speech about how standardized tests are racist and classist and are made for rich white people to succeed, and based on rich white people's notions of success. I don't know how much of my impassioned talk stuck in their brains, but hopefully they internalized the idea that their worth does not depend on their test scores. At the same time, however, I administered a test that, although geared toward my particular class, mirrored standardized tests in order to better prepare the students. Given that children believe what adults do much more than what they say, I recognize that my well-intentioned message probably fell flat.

Breakthrough and other programs like it that emphasize timing, discipline, and skills, are very effective in working against the opportunity gap. And if they foster the right sense of community, as BTSF did, then the students enjoy their time there deeply. As I see it, to fix a broken system, you can either work from inside of it in subversive ways or work outside of it in creating a new system. BT definitely does the former; the students curate a skill set that will serve them in primarily white institutions. Our pretest-posttest model for the writing curriculum mirrors standardized testing, and program data showed student improvement in standardized tests across subject areas.

After reading Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*, I wonder if Breakthrough and programs like it, such as Teach for America, might be leading an assimilationist charge. According to Kendi, an assimilationist is "One who is expressing the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group" (24). In the realm of the public school system, this looks like holding students of color to the white standards of standardized testing. Kendi asserts that "The use of standardized tests to measure aptitude and intelligence is one of the most effective racist policies ever devised to degrade Black minds and legally exclude Black bodies" (101). He poses a few questions as an alternative to standardized testing:

> "What if we measured intelligence by how knowledgeable individuals are about their own environments? What if we measured intellect by an individual's desire to know? What if we realized the best way to ensure an effective educational system is not by standardizing our curricula and tests but by standardizing the opportunities available to all students?" (103)

Rather than encouraging marginalized students to submit to the standards of their oppressors -- including students of any marginalized identities -- this practice entails providing opportunities based on the needs of the spaces which the students occupy. Though improving standardized test scores through individual programs works for the individual children, those same children grow up comparing themselves against these standards. Maybe if enough of these kids grow up and amass wealth, this educated mass will be able to enact changes in their community - but then others wait years for change, and fundamentally racist policies remain unchallenged. Many of these programs simultaneously lobby for education reform. However, they also support organizations like Teach For America, who point fingers at the quality of schools, rather than the systemic lack of resources to those schools. They put white educators, many of whom maintain an unexamined white savior complex, and push out longtime black and brown educators. Aside from ethical qualms with specific programs, the individualist strategy

itself helps only the individual children that it serves, instead of changing the system, which would eliminate the need for those programs.

I'm not going to tell any child, and especially not one with multiple marginalized identities, that they should be working against a system instead of subscribing to it. As a white person, it's not my job to decide the best route for antiracist pedagogy to combat racist policies. I don't even think that being a public school teacher in the US (my career path) counts as subverting the system, though with my personal choices I can definitely manifest antiracist solutions. However, overall, in the future I will pursue a more radical form of equality and justice, one that's proactive instead of reactive. To me, that means teaching children to think critically about their environments by cultivating safety, curiosity, and respect inside the classroom that students later use to bolster themselves beyond our sheltered academic world.

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Theoretical Background

Student Agency

The seed for this project took root in the spring of my junior year during Beth Benedix's class on Nietzsche and Kafka. At the same time, I was taking Developmental Theories in Education, in which we discussed William Perry's theory of intellectual development.

Under Perry's "Scheme of Intellectual Development in the College Years," young adults pass through four basic stages of development. In the first, dualism and received knowledge, people see knowledge in a binary of right vs wrong, good vs bad. Students want teachers to show them the right answer and act as receivers rather than seekers of knowledge. In the second stage, multiplicity and subjective knowledge, students see different, equally valid viewpoints and conclude that no right answer exists. They usually submit to what they perceive as the most knowledgeable or authoritative source. In the third stage, relativism and procedural knowledge, students begin to grow confidence in their ability

to interpret evidence and come to a conclusion. They understand the ever-changing nature of knowledge. In the last stage, commitment and constructed knowledge, students commit to an opinion developed after research, recognizing that their opinion can change based on emerging research. Not all people reach this stage; many spend their whole lives believing authority figures instead of analyzing various sources themselves. Overall, the process requires active participation from both student and teacher. Often, teachers are seen as givers and students as receivers - what Freire calls the banking model of education, which I'll discuss later - but students have to search for their own answers too, seeing knowledge as a process requiring active engagement.

At this point in my life, the Perry model made so much sense. I had just started viewing myself as an active agent in my intellectual development; I was starting to realize the necessity of analysis in any pursuit. I just left my sorority and had extra time to think and consume news and develop ideals. But why did I have to wait until my junior year of college for someone to tell me that knowledge is subjective? Textbooks aren't written that way. Teachers don't talk that way. In my research for this paper I also read "Lies My Teacher Told Me," a 1993 bestseller by James Lowden, which surveys 12 high school history textbooks and exposes their lackluster pedagogy. He shows how textbooks grossly misrepresent the study of history, not only presenting historical suggestions as absolute truth, but also spreading blatant misinformation in order to portray the U.S. in a more positive light. In our classrooms, the past can be drawn into a neat little box by unknown actors; thus, students cannot connect historical injustices to the present, leaving them feeling disenfranchised.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche outlines his process of intellectual development. "Of the three metamorphoses of the spirit I tell you: how the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, a child" ("Thus Spoke Zarathustra" 137). In the stage of the camel, one follows duty blindly, burdened by the mandates of society. As a lion, a negative definition of selfhood causes a rejection of social norms as the lion casts off all prior teaching and says "I will" instead of "thou shalt"

(138-39). The child, on the other hand, "is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, … a sacred 'Yes'" (139); as a child, one must love and learn again as "the spirit now wills his own will and he who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world" (139). Through this metamorphosis – blind acceptance, aggressive rejection, and informed search for truth – we learn to seek truth for ourselves, both listening to others and creating freedom for ourselves.

How can we create an education system which challenges students to think for themselves instead of imbibing them with information? How do we create an institution in which every child is Nietzsche's child, innocent on the quest for truth? Will a student-driven educational project like that necessarily be equity-driven, or do students need more guidance to appreciate diverse perspectives?

Radical equality

Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* preaches the surprisingly radical concept that all people are equally intelligent. He explains how a schoolmaster liberates his students by proving that they don't need a schoolmaster to learn. Joseph Jacotot, the "ignorant schoolmaster," teaches subjects he knows nothing about, guiding students in how to learn rather than what to learn. Rancière shares this philosophy in the form of a story, encouraging teachers to present their reality in the subjective form to break down the perceived power and intelligence barrier between teacher and student (Citton). All people, Rancière maintains, are equally intelligent; only their circumstances cause that intelligence to manifest in different ways. In this Marxist pedagogical manifesto, he makes a case for the working class to take agency.

While reading this book, I continued my work in the After School Enrichment Program at Greencastle Middle School. The first few weeks there were demoralizing. Countless times, any question I asked received an "I don't know in response," ranging in tone from defiant to unbothered to dejected. One boy in particular would sigh dramatically at me every day. One time, he burst out. "Can you just leave me alone?!" So many of the kids have terrible relationships with all adults, and reject any attempt

on our part to initiate conversation or engage them in their homework. Since I'm not their classroom teacher, I can't divulge that I think their homework assignments are pointless; I can only help them hack away at their 25 missing assignments.

So Rancière's text spoke to me. But how does one stop explicating? The education system is built on explication; we communicate with students almost exclusively in explication. Yves Citton comments on the contradictory nature of Rancière's theory: he urges the halt of explication as he simultaneously explicates Jacotot's book. However, she argues that rather than explaining Jacotot's theory, Rancière rewrites it (26). Instead of initiating the "transfer of knowledge," the teacher is "influencing the will" (27). Explication, on the other hand, serves to teach the students that they are ignorant; in order to break free of that cycle, the teacher must convince the student of their own agency (28). In this way, Rancière resembles Freire; moreover, though both gear their liberation pedagogy towards the socioeconomically marginalized, they clarify that everyone is harmed in the non egalitarian system while equality exists only as a goal, instead of a foundational treatise of society. Citton suggests that to step away from explication, teachers must work as translators, rewriting texts for new relevance, but never explaining them (37): thus, teaching becomes narrative, rather than explanatory. In the narrative, ideas present as subjective, which the student can either accept or reject after careful analysis.

Antiracism

Perhaps the defining theoretical framework of my evolving pedagogy is antiracism. A buzzword in the education field right now, the word antiracist as I know it comes from a famous saying of the radical activist Angela Y. Davis: "In a racist society it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist" ("Being Antiracist"). The ABAR (Anti-Bias Anti-Racist) education movement has many followers in social justice-oriented spaces. The field of antiracism owes its beginnings to critical race theory of the late 20th century, but the modern conception of the term finds a manifesto in Ibram X.

Kendi's "How to Be an Antiracist" (2009), a New York Times bestseller packed with radical definitions of racism, foundational historical facts, and specific action points. Kendi defines an antiracist as "One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea" (13).

According to Kendi, racism manifests primarily in policies, which then give rise to racist ideologies in order to justify the exploitation and injustice. The key difference between Kendi's theory and others lies in his centering of racist policy - "any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups" as the primary cause, not symptom, of racism: "There is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups" (18). Thus, the primary focus of antiracist people should be policy, not education or mentorship or charity or whatever other temporary remedies people or institutions have used in the past to combat inequity. Moreover, an activist can only be someone who "produces power and policy change, not mental change" (209).

Kendi had a lot of quotable moments in the book, but one sentence struck me more than others: "Healing symptoms instead of changing policies is bound to fail in healing society" (202). Unlearning the tendency to support individualist solutions to systemic issues is a process with which I constantly struggle. Stories compel me more than facts; individuals compel me more than policies. I even rethink my societal role as a teacher, a role which I had previously considered the most impactful method to mitigate inequities. Under-resourced schools will continue to be under-resourced, even with a new workforce. I would have never said that fixing a mindset will fix poverty, because poverty isn't caused by a mindset, but by a lack of money. But by touting education as the fix to inequality, wasn't I just reframing that racist, classist idea of "teaching a man to fish"? Of course, education can still indirectly influence policy. Despite low faith in the democratic process, I will still encourage the electorate to vote in favor of reparations for past harms by teaching them how to process reality and appreciate difference.

In the end, Kendi's book shocked me into seeing the ways in which I still upheld white supremacist patterns of thought. PBL will not fix the education system. Restorative justice will not fix the education system. ABAR pedagogy will not fix the education system. The result of inequality in the education system is lack of financial resources, and the solution to inequality in the education system is equitable distribution of financial resources.

When I told my friend about everything I'd learned in the two days of reading the book, how I'd woken up to more ways I was internalizing white supremacy, she listened intently. Then she asked, "Do you think that constantly finding something that's better, constantly figuring out the ways in which you're wrong, just leads to stagnation?"

Freire's often-quoted words from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* came to my mind:

"The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a 'circle of

certainty' within which he also imprisons reality. The more radical he is, the more fully he enters

into reality so that, knowing it better, he can better transform it. He is not afraid to confront, to

listen, to see the world unveiled. He is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue

with them. He does not consider himself the proprietor of history or of men, or the liberator of

the oppressed: but he does commit himself, within history, to fight at their side" (23-24).

The radical, the antiracist, is not afraid to confront the truth of history, not afraid to confront knowledge and methodology which is constantly evolving. To accept one precept as absolute truth is to falsely assume that absolute truth exists. Thus, in the face of evidence which suggests that our systems do not work, that they must be rethought and reworked, in the face of emerging truths, we keep evolving and adapting to work alongside the people.

Overall

I'm a constant consumer of information. If I'm waiting in line, sitting in class a few minutes early, or taking a break from homework, I'm always scrolling through my phone. I read the news, of course

(usually the *New York Times*), and I snapchat my friends, but I also spend about an hour a day scrolling through the Instagram and Twitter feeds of activists and advocates. It does cause undue stress: at least once a week I have to tell myself to stop because it becomes emotionally overwhelming, and I find it hard to escape from a heavy and demoralizing news cycle. But the more time I invest, the higher my tolerance for resistance and unlearning becomes; I learn *a lot*, all the time. For those seeking to get the unfiltered perspectives of people actually doing the work, on the ground, all the time, there's no better place than social media. It has connected inspired and passionate people from all over and given a platform to those who are marginalized, whose voices aren't usually amplified in mainstream news, or in the Western capitalist historical narrative.

So most days, I spend about an hour on my phone on social media, connecting with friends and consuming content from social justice and teaching influencers. I have so many ideas in my head about how capitalism is destroying us and the planet, how white people need to step up and take accountability for our actions, how I have to stop hiding and stand up to racist, classist, ableist, sexist, transphobic, and homophobic people in my circles. But when I step into the classroom at Greencastle Middle School, where the majority-white student body, marginalized through poverty and a lack of opportunities, but espousing conservative values, I mostly forget all of those things I was learning about. Of course I still have a conversation with students when they say something problematic, and hold high standards no matter what I know about their personal struggles, but my actions aren't making any real difference.

After theoretical calculations, I chose to write this essay in a more narrative form. Like Nietzsche and Perry, I believe that each person must carry out their own search for truth. Like Rancière, I believe that each human is equally intelligent. Thus, I lay out this story as something that I hope you listen to, evaluate, and analyze, but I will not claim it to be the absolute truth, though it's the truest thing I could

come up with. Moreover, I value storytelling as a legitimate form of communication, and I wish to uphold those values in my writing.

In the spring of my junior year, I had one of those semesters when every class feels like it's talking about the same thing. On some note, that means that I've found what matters to me in my education. On another note, it also meant that I had a lot of time to think and talk about the ideas presented to me. My classes on childhood development, literary theory, Dickens, and existentialism culminated in one question: How can we educate critical-thinking young people through literature? Along with that came a few more: Why do we teach the books we do? How could we teach those books in a way that's relevant to modern problems? How can we incorporate anti-racist practices and social justice into the classroom, especially in the literature curriculum? How do we implement ground-breaking ideas outside of academia? In a few conversations with my now-sponsor, Beth Benedix, these questions came together to form my current thesis topic. I wanted to do something that mattered outside of my private, liberal-arts college -- something that connected to the community and enacted positive social change.

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In Practice: The Classroom Module

Background

To everyone who asks me what I'm doing for my thesis, I respond that I'm "creating a project-based learning module for use in a middle school classroom that focuses on anti-racist teaching and social justice, specifically geared towards white students."

To which they respond, "Oh, cool," or "What?," or my favorite, "...???"

Quite a few loaded words show up in my description of my project. I'm trying to make this curriculum a culmination of my college experience. I suppose I want to test whether my ambitious

learning goals will work in the traditional, standards-based public school classroom, combining

project-based learning with anti-racist/ anti-bias teaching.

My thesis sponsor, Beth Benedix, has amazing connections in the Putnam County school system

after years of collaborating with teachers through The Castle, a non-profit that facilitated PBL modules.

She connected me with an eighth-grade language arts teacher, Cassidy Holt-Spencer, who agreed to

partner with me on facilitating the module in her classroom. She gave me the names of the two books

they would be reading, *The Giver* and *Life of Pi*, and with almost no stipulations, let me take over her

classroom for a week. I was amazed at her willingness to let an inexperienced student experiment with

her students, and I am very grateful for the opportunity it gave me.

About Greencastle Middle School

The 2019-2020 school year marks my fourth year living in Greencastle, and throughout that

time, I've had varying degrees of involvement with the community. As a DePauw student, I don't have to

interact with anyone outside of the isolated campus if I don't want to. Most people don't get to know

Greencastle beyond seeing Trump signs in people's yards and in shop windows -- which is enough to

deter anyone. During my four years in town, Greencastle has seen six racial bias incidents in two months

(the spring of my sophomore year), massive and sudden cuts to DePauw staff (the spring of my junior

year), and the election of Indiana's first transgender legislator (the fall of my senior year). The town is

not a safe space for students of color or LGBTQ+ students, and residents are quick to point out the

divisions between the liberal campus and the conservative surrounding area. Most importantly to my

project, it serves as a useful space to study problems of equity in the classroom. Large tensions and

divisions exist between two sets of residents in the town: those affiliated with DePauw, largely

upper-middle class families in which adults have advanced degrees, and those not affiliated with

DePauw, largely working class families in which adults have a high school diploma or GED. The

disparities in socioeconomic class in this town are visible when driving just a few blocks past DePauw's

campus, but they're impossible to miss inside of the school buildings, and they were never more apparent to me than when I started my PBL module.

The town's background itself made an interesting topic for research. But in the weeks leading up to my project, the school erupted in a sort of disorder that mirrored perfectly the dilemma I'd seen in the system. According to Beth, it all started when a favored social studies teacher sent a popular seventh-grader to the office on apparently unfounded claims, and the class rose up in defense of the student. That was the breaking point for kid vs adult tension that had been building all year. The entire grade started staging periodic protests against teachers. Sometimes, they stood up in class and refused to sit down. Another time, at exactly noon, they all rose in the lunch room and wouldn't sit down. According to eyewitness sources (the art teacher), the principal went berserk. Boys were peeing on the bathroom walls. In response, they closed the bathroom. Information about the protests was disseminated mainly through Tiktok.

Meanwhile at the after school program, I witnessed a growing divide among the students and the tired authority figures. A culture of distrust pervaded the program; the whole system was founded on lack of respect for each other and pettiness was common on both sides. The week I presented the module, the eighth-graders took a day-long trip to go bowling in Crawfordsville and missed a day of valuable instruction, adding to the absurdity. Cassidy gave me a copy of the book *Readicide*, which professes that lack of extended reading time is killing student enjoyment of reading, and student reading in general. Who gave her the book? Her curriculum director, which the district hired in the same year that they didn't raise salaries for teachers, leading to the Red for Ed strike on the Indiana statehouse. The book's message is antithetical to the way they're supposed to teach in classrooms. The fall of 2019 was a trying time for Indiana education, and similar trends play out across the country, crying for systemic reform.

Building the Module

To build my curriculum for the class module, I started with the baseline that I got from Cassidy. One week for the project, six classes, approx. 25 students per class. Five classes were reading *The Giver*, and the honors class read *Life of Pi*. It was my job to get them from their baseline understanding of the book to a project in which they could invest. I scoured online resources for projects that incorporated anti-racism with each of the books.

The Giver follows Jonas, a 12-year old boy, finds out the truth about the sacrifices his utopian community has made to pursue "Sameness," the absence of pain or difference, and the limitation of choice. In *Life of Pi,* the protagonist wrestles with religion and existential dread as he narrates his marooning on a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific with a tiger, focusing on the nature of storytelling and magical realism. Both texts had some sort of anti-racist undertone. During discussion, Cassidy's classes covered the difference between equity and equality for *The Giver*, and for *Life of Pi*, they talked about religious differences and the value of storytelling. However, I struggled to build a project that gave students full freedom and steered them towards social justice. I considered adding another requirement for the project, "must address identity or social justice," but I worried that students wouldn't even have the foundation to execute that rule. Ultimately, I prioritized student freedom over orientation towards equity, hoping that if our opening discussion raised those themes, their projects would reflect that discussion. In this decision, I sold out a part of my ideals, and after reading Kendi, I'm afraid it was the wrong part. In the future, faced with sacrificing equity or method, I will choose to sacrifice method.

I entered the class module expecting to come out with ideas of how to engage students in project-based learning, mostly how to guide them when they were overwhelmed by the sheer openness of the assignment. I knew that engaging every student might be difficult, but I prepared plenty of scaffolding to ease them into the process. But more than that, the huge disparity between the honors class and the other classes smacked me in the face, convincing me even more of what I already knew: if we want to fix anything about the broken school system, we have to center equity in our solutions.

For this reason, the classroom module led me to reevaluate my championing of project-based learning, pushing a question from the back to the forefront of my mind: Does PBL advance equity? Answering this question takes a lot of research, and hands-on experience that I don't have. The consensus from ABAR educators on Instagram (a great resource to follow trends in the social justice teacher online community) seems to be that PBL doesn't do the trick if you're not focusing on equity first. And that's exactly what I saw. Obviously, PBL didn't solve the problems that already existed in the classroom. The engagement problems with the high-achieving students, sure. But the equity problems? Not at all. It actually made the gaps between the students even more striking.

Most of the classrooms I have observed miss many of the guidelines from *Teaching Tolerance* on inclusive teaching practices. But in schools that don't have a specific mission and focus on equity or differentiation, even if one teacher facilitates a safe, successful classroom environment, students still confront an unsafe environment in every other classroom they enter.

Implementation

Launch Day

On Monday morning, I came into school with almost 150 printed worksheets. At the beginning of class, I gave them my spiel: I told them that I was a senior at DePauw working on my thesis, which I needed to complete in order to graduate. My goal is to give them the space to work on a project that's relevant outside of the classroom, a project in which they align their interests with the book. The project has only 3 rules: it must be tangentially related to the book, it must be relevant outside of the classroom, and they must share it with someone outside of school. Then, we read a passage to get into the conceptual space (a suggestion from Beth). For *Life of Pi*, I brought in a critic's review of the novel that discussed its use of magical realism and its discussion of the responsibility of storytelling (Wood). For *The Giver*, we read the last few paragraphs of the novel. Then, I gave them five minutes of free-write time to answer two questions. For *Life of Pi*: What questions do you have about the book or for the

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author, OR What about this book do you think matters? For *The Giver*: What questions do you still have,

OR What do you think happens next?

After giving them time to think, I got up in front of the class and gathered their ideas for a

concept map on the board. We started with common themes, then dove into the questions they still

had. Once we reviewed the themes they had covered with Cassidy and gathered their questions, I

passed out the worksheet to let them fill it out, brainstorming how to relate the themes in the book to

the questions they had. The worksheets are available in the appendix.

After 10 minutes to fill out the first side, I announced that they could get with partners if they

wanted and begin to fill out the back side of the worksheet and plan what exactly they wanted to do

with their project. On the back side, they answered questions about their learning goals and why they

mattered, starting to think more concretely.

Here, many students were confused. "Wait, so what *is* the project?" they asked.

"Literally anything you want, as long as you can convince me that it's somehow related to the

book."

Joy and confusion erupted equally. Some students immediately began chatting excitedly with

their partners, ecstatic about the ability to explore their interests. Others gazed back blankly and began

whispering worriedly. Still others appeared to take no notice that I had said anything. That first day, they

had around 15 minutes to chat while Cassidy and I walked around asking about their plans. After a few

minutes, I projected a list of sample projects I imagined, accessible in the appendix. Even though I

clarified that they didn't have to complete the whole worksheet, most filled in responses to every

question, no matter how vague they were. By the time the bell rang, a variety of ideas were circling the

room as students shared, most enthusiastically.

Because of my class schedule, I couldn't attend the work days; instead, I watched most of the

presentations. For days 2 and three, I gave Cassidy scaffolded worksheets to provide to the students.
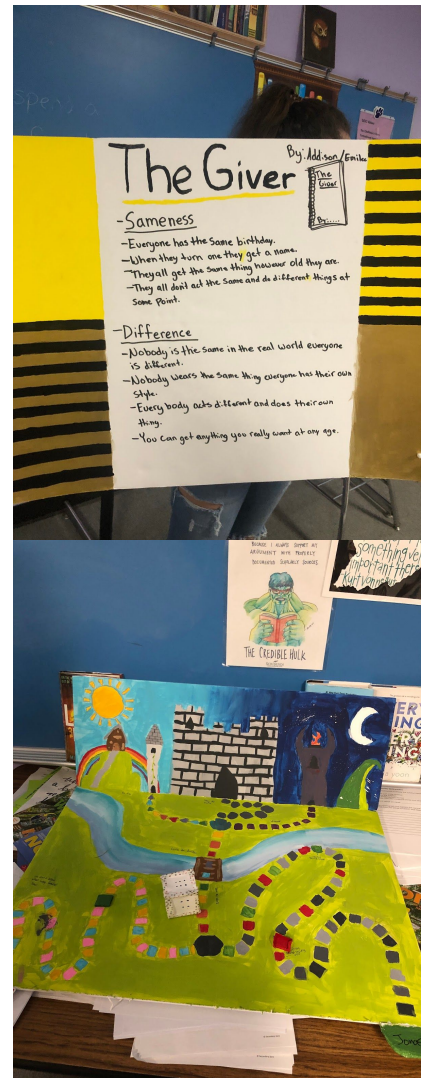
Presentation Day

On Friday, I got to observe both work days and presentations. During work time, students found it difficult to branch out from traditional ideas of book reports: they had powerpoints and posters, mostly research based. But those students who hadn't diverged from conventional project ideas seemed very impressed by those who had; creative projects received more questions and more clapping afterwards.

Some examples of what I consider conventional projects:

- Research and Powerpoint presentation on: history of death, color blindness, historical dystopias, the psychology of groupthink, hallucinogens

- Venn diagram comparing Jonas' society and our society

- Map of a model utopia

- Board game modeled after the book (at least 5 groups chose this option, which I had suggested in example projects)

- Instagram accounts of Jonas, Gabriel, etc. (my suggestion)

Some examples of non-traditional projects:

- The ABC's of color children's book

- Original rap song about dreams

- TikToks about rules in Jonas' society

- "Hardship and Healing," an original composition for violin and viola*

- 3-D printed boat model*

- Bible of Magical Realism*

- College-level poster presentation on the psychology of the will to live*

- First chapter of original novel (unrelated to the book)*

*Produced for *Life of Pi* by the Honors class; all others produced for *The Giver*

The Honors class had a significantly higher ratio of unconventional to conventional projects, around 6 unconventional :1 conventional as compared to 1:10 for non-honors classes.

Afterthoughts

The presentations revealed two striking disparities in results between the Honors and other classes, not only in the quality of the material presented, but also in the attitudes of presenters. Though some classes were better than others, many students who had excitedly shared their ideas with Cassidy or with me during work time ditched that excitement in front of the class. I asked them to discuss how the project was important outside of the classroom, and who they would share it with. Multiple students repeated that the project wasn't relevant to their lives, and they wouldn't share it with anyone. Many threw out the possibility of sharing with their families. A few came up with creative responses. In project-based models, finding a relevant audience outside of the classroom is a key component. In my wish to make the project as open-ended as possible, I had failed to give them enough guidance; providing community partners would have avoided this pitfall.

I wanted so badly for them to feel connected to the project and make it relevant to them, but they so badly wanted to minimize their perceived attention to school that they rebelled against the idea that any school project could be relevant to their lives. Even though I gave them almost complete freedom, many final products looked like something you would usually create for an English class, like a Powerpoint presentation or poster about symbols. Each class had its own trends; students followed their peers in both material and attitudes. Even those students who had gone above and beyond, like

one who made Tik-toks about *The Giver*, insisted that they chose the project "because I thought it would be easy."

Obviously, my project-based model had many flaws. In fact, Beth insists that it's really not even project-based, and she's right; for that, I would need a public audience in the form of community partners, a driving question, and a goal that fills a community need. In my fervent desire for open exploration, I failed to provide enough scaffolding. The unfamiliar format shocked students, and they retreated into what they already knew. I know that I can't pin all of my disappointment on PBL's shortcomings because I didn't really follow best practices for PBL anyway. However, the seed of my resistance to the inquiry-based model comes from the wide range of projects that I saw. In the Honors classes, the kids had a blast - it was a huge success. In the non-honors classes, the result was at best "okay." I loved seeing the most motivated kids run away with the project and come back with something brilliant, and I definitely think school culture should shift towards open-ended, critical thinking-based curriculum. But that's not my priority as a teacher, a value which this project solidified for me.

Crafting a student-centered, anti-racist, inquiry-based classroom will be great for the students involved, and an honorable pursuit. But if I act like that's enough, like I can stop at that without continuously lobbying for policy change, I'm upholding white supremacist patterns of thought that place the blame on individuals rather than the system. To me, we can't create a better school system without addressing poverty and other systemic inequalities.

<div align="center">+++</div>

Case Studies

Southport Elementary

In January, I visited Southport Elementary School (SES) in Perry Township with another student also working on her thesis. Our mutual thesis advisor set us both up with the Vice Principal. The school came highly recommended; Beth had visited, and she gushed about its wonderful environment. Shortly

after our arrival that morning, the fire drill started blaring. Tiny students filed past us in their

solid-colored polos, gaping at our unfamiliar faces, a response I expect from elementary students which

means they're paying attention to the adults in their community.

The school staff clearly builds an intentional community. The walls proudly display evidence of

student work alongside value statements. This school knows its core values and constantly reevaluates

how to best serve its students, and the physical evidence of that self-awareness demonstrates their

preparedness to every community member and visitor. Both admiring educators and potential

community partners for the projects visit the school often, so students and staff have no trouble

welcoming observers.

I visited the school to see an example of a thriving project-based all-school model, but the

students, teachers, and administrators impressed me in many other ways. Evidence of student success

covered the walls in the form of posters outlining their projects. Student-teacher and

student-administrator interactions showed the school's investment in mutual respect. The teachers'

classroom practices both inspired curiosity and openness in the students and fostered a sense of

community which encouraged them to lean on each other for help.

Unlike other elementary students I'd met in other classrooms, these kids actually looked us in

the eye and eagerly answered our questions. We complimented their etiquette, and Spencer explained

how the school had identified that need and fulfilled it. The fifth graders were planning a Veteran's Day

event and pinpointed a lack of people skills in the younger students. So with adult help, they gathered

information on politeness like how to do introductions, small talk, and how to behave generally, then

presented that research to other students. This process perfectly demonstrated the project-based and

student-driven model, but it also exemplified how PBL can advance equity: the students identify their

interests and needs, then teachers help them gain explicit skills which they share with other students,

acting as simultaneous learners and leaders.

In the classroom, teachers have a diverse pallet of skills with which they facilitate the inquiry-based structure. They use the classic project-based model of roadmarks and benchmarks. Every classroom features those giant paper notepads at the front on which they design concept maps. The entire school uses a cluster model: teachers and administrators group students based on ability so that students of different abilities have peers that challenge them, but students can teach skills to each other because they all stay in the same classroom. The clusters have their desks grouped together, a deliberate choice which emphasizes student collaboration rather than teacher domination; the clusters themselves facilitate student-to-student instruction.

Along those lines, the school practices very little pull-out for either advanced or struggling students. Students designated for the advanced group work in one cluster, but they share a classroom with all other students. Similarly, students designated as struggling might share a cluster with each other, but a classroom with students at all levels. SES still practices pull-out for students whose RTI groups necessitate it, but that doesn't happen during core classes.

All of these elements make a great school, but for an aspiring teacher looking for a community, SES showed an admirably stalwart commitment to professional development. The administration has completely gotten rid of staff meetings; instead, the teachers attend intentional professional development once a week to maximize their effectiveness, each week focusing on a different discipline. Master teachers, who develop curriculum full time, demonstrate a strategy to mentor teachers, who teach full time, to implement in their classrooms. The master teachers follow up to assess effectiveness. They might tweak or discard a strategy, but if it works well, the mentor teachers pass it on to all of the other teachers in the building. Thus, staff members commit continuously to honing their practices in order to better serve students. The entire school works on a model of PBL: they identify a need, test a plan, then disseminate it.

Perry Township has consistently provided high-quality education for its students, but they've had to make significant changes to adapt to recent demographic shifts in their community. In the past ten years, the district has made a home for an influx of Burmese refugees. Burmese students make up more than 60% of SES's population (iDOE INView). Along with a smaller group of Spanish-speaking immigrants (6.9%), these children represent the more than 50% of the population designated as English language learning (iDOE INView). SES has become a leader in the Indianapolis area for English language education alongside their gains from shifting to the project-based model. 85% of students are classified as "economically disadvantaged" according to the Department of Education's measure for free and reduced lunch eligibility (iDOE INView).

Greencastle Middle School

I would like to thank Greencastle Middle School for showing me the importance of school culture. In my short six months at the school (unfortunately cut even shorter than the 8 months I had planned), I developed a comprehensive idea of what to look for in a future school. Overall, the teacher-student relationship seems to rely on distrust. The teachers' hypervigilance and nagging makes the students feel stifled and belittled, which in turn causes them to distrust the teachers' intentions.

When I started at the ASE program, students showed a variety of responses to the adults, a term which for their purposes includes college students. I understand much better now their attitudes toward adults and authority figures after completing a course on trauma-informed practices, but at the time, I was shocked and puzzled. A few students latched on to instructors, craving physical touch and validation. We were taught to reassure them, but to keep our distance and not let them get too attached. The majority avoided eye contact, resisted assistance, and quickly became frustrated with our efforts to engage in conversation. Of course, some students fell in the middle, largely indifferent to the adults as people, but willing to ask us for homework help. The third response seems typical of middle

school-age students, but in this program it represented the minority. Most kids fell into one of the first two groups, their responses mostly gendered - girls tended to cling, and boys tended to resist.

From their resistance, I perceived an overwhelming feeling of distrust of adults on their part, which I attributed to their poor relationships with authority figures, including family members and teachers, in the past. But the more I asked genuine questions about their lives and tried to make most of our interactions positive, the more they softened towards me. Then, I only saw their uglier sides spark up in situations of extreme agitation with me, or in their interactions with the older program staff - the former and current GMS teachers. Their distrust of adults seemed to lessen when adults actually treated them with respect: trusting them to go to the bathroom, believing them as an instinct, and allowing them choice in their activities. The zone I entered in August housed teachers who believed that the students didn't have to like them to learn from them. The more time I spend with students, the more I realize the opposite is true: a learning community must be built on relationships centered on trust, respect, and love.

In February, a mission poster materialized on the purple and white brick walls. I took a photo immediately in my state of shock. After five months of working in the building four days a week, I encountered my first explicit statement of GMS' values. These posters send the message that teachers and administrators saw problems at the school, met to discuss those issues, and came out with a clear idea of their core values. The evidence that they engaged in that conversation represents a significant step in identifying and fixing school culture. This values statement comes in response to the aforementioned

uprising of Fall 2019, when the students (especially seventh-graders) protested against the administration. I cannot say whether the faculty and staff translated these vague values into concrete practices.

Overall, a disconnect surfaces between what they say they value and how that plays out. For example, the green values, "see/ hear every day," include a "positive environment," "teaching & learning," and "student engagement." The most important values are drowning in ambiguity. On the other hand, the red values, "never see/ hear," are specific and abundant: "bullying," "angry sarcasm," "giving up," "gossip," "horseplay," "venting in front of students," and many more. The green and yellow sections shape a wonderful, though vague, picture of their goal school culture. The red section admonishes mostly students for specific actions, and its tone annoys even me, an instructor.

I appreciate that GMS' staff attempted to work through their issues, but the poster represented only the first step. Perhaps staff members are already having this conversation, but the values statement needs reinforcement from tangible policies that facilitate respect and trust between students and teachers. They might want to complete coursework on trauma-informed teaching practices, because students would benefit from support that took into account each individual's unique history and experience. Moreover, the trauma-informed framework encourages students to build social and emotional skills as a form of resilience, recognizing not only the importance of differentiation between individuals but also the necessity of securing physical and emotional safety before learning. Because the students at Greencastle Middle School have experienced high levels of trauma, the school has a greater responsibility to support and encourage them.

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Conclusion

When everything changed

This project took many different directions. Thank you for sticking with me. I worked in spurts: for days, I hacked away on the computer, click-click-clicking my feelings into existence. Once or twice I went a month without adding a single character to the document. I have questioned the usefulness of a senior thesis. I have decided to follow through anyway.

In February, Beth, Jacob (another student), and I attended an AAC&U conference in Jacksonville, Florida. We facilitated a discussion-based session on "Adventures in Student-Generated Learning." Though the weekend provided a great opportunity for delicious free food, luxurious hotel accommodations, and companionship with two of my favorite people, the conference itself brought to the forefront many of the ideas I'd been grappling with. Though the conference callout asked for student participation and student-centered pedagogy, Jacob and I were the only students in a sea of middle-aged faces. The keynote speaker gave advice on how to relate to members of Gen-Z, a technology-obsessed and easily distracted breed, treating students as a puzzle whose solution requires professional advice. Sitting in those sessions, I felt that degrading lack of student-teacher trust from the other side. These professors and administrators could talk about "the key to understanding student needs" all day, but they couldn't invite any actual students to their conference; they clearly doubted that we deserved to participate in that conversation.

Facilitating teacher-student trust should be easiest in the university setting when students are almost adults, completely capable of rational thought. But even at that level, it doesn't always happen; I can see how achieving that kind of relationship with younger children appears daunting. But students don't need to review every lesson plan and sign off on every decision. Above all, we need a relationship and a learning community. Adjusted for age and maturity, that statement holds across grade levels, inside and outside of the formal education system.

Things were looking up for a while. I even made a few edits on my thesis and sent out a draft. But on March 11, everything changed when we received an email notifying us of the cancellation of in-person classes. My friends and I joke that we now chronologize our life into two sections: pre-email and post-email. In the days after, everyone asked the same question: "Where were you when you got the email?"

I was at the stove, making a signature Wednesday night deluxe Ramen dinner, cracking an egg into the bowl, when my roommate Fumi gasped and read the news from the couch. Now, reminiscing on conversations and scenes from college, we think back, "So that was only two weeks pre-email," setting the scene days, weeks, or moments before an honestly traumatic event. In the span of a week, my life changed completely: Wednesday, I went to class in the morning, tutored in the afternoon, worked at the middle school, messed around at Pottery Club, and went to the local bar. Four days later, I bid goodbye to my friends, some forever, as I packed up my things and drove home to Indianapolis.

Even writing this paper feels so different from my parents' home. I don't feel the pressure of academia (maybe a good thing), but I also won't feel the ritualistic sense of accomplishment after stapling a hard copy and sharing a drink with my friends. Luckily, I chose a topic that will always hold relevance for me, and gains attention in the public interest as we experience a massive shift to virtual learning. This new digital mode exacerbates the strengths and weaknesses of our institutions. Students with disabilities who have requested and been denied remote access for years now see everyone enjoying the accessibility of virtual learning. Classes that excelled socially before the pandemic may struggle to recover the same enthusiasm, but classes that lacked those relationships have basically lost all semblance of momentum or relevance.

Student-generated learning has become more accessible, and more necessary, than ever. Differentiation becomes the norm as teachers adjust to the realities of remote instruction and the resource and health gaps between students. Still, the more we engage with the digital possibilities, the

more we realize the undeniable importance of in-person interaction. I hope that when we return to the physical, walled, classroom - and for some of us, like graduating seniors, that might not happen - we bring a newfound appreciation for physical proximity and the emotional closeness it fosters. Then, I hope we take advantage of that closeness to militantly continue our conversations about equity, accessibility, and compassion.

Moving Forward

I'm glad that I had four years in a sheltered liberal-arts bubble to think, but I'm ready to move beyond that space. The academy now seems futile and ineffective, and I'm glad that one and a half years ago I decided to be a teacher instead of going to graduate school. Plus, these two months of online learning have reminded me how much I need a break from being a student.

Now, looking forward to entering the teaching profession full-on, I want to continue to enlist people in a conversation and open up this space to take people along on my journey. I'm not sure where I'll be in six months or a year, but I know that I'll continue to pursue a career in education that prioritizes community solutions. For now, I'm sick of writing about it - so I'm going to act on it instead.

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Appendix: Module Materials

Class Plans

Day 1: Monday 12.2
- 5 min: Introduce project and objectives
- 5 min: Read passage
    - Giver: last few paragraphs of book
    - Life of Pi: Review from critic
- 5 min: Freewrite individually.
    - Giver: Answer either: What questions do you still have, OR What do you think happens next?
    - Life of Pi: Answer either: What questions do you have about the book or for the author, OR What about this book do you think matters?
- 5 min: Group brainstorm
    - Throw ideas on the board of themes, common questions, etc.
- 10 min: Front of worksheet
    - Give them time to think alone and fill out the questions
- 10 min: Back of worksheet
    - Get with partners, start working
    - Give them example projects after 5 min of brainstorming

Excerpt from "Credulity," James Wood, *London Review of Books*, 2002:

  Yann Martel's novel tells the story of a 16-year-old Indian boy who is shipwrecked in the Pacific and survives 227 days at sea in the company of a Bengal tiger. Since this fact is now well known, as well known as the fact that the book recently won the Booker Prize, Life of Pi risks being shrunk to the monad of its narrative 'premise', like any Hollywood concept movie. Doubtless, people will choose to read it insofar as they can tolerate this premise. And the reduction of the novel to its magic realist challenge would not be unfair, since the book is constituted of little other than this singular story, and moreover is explicitly – that is to say, theoretically – about the inevitability of the magical in storytelling. Martel's novel is evangelical in its defence of the shimmeringly implausible. 'If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for?' the survivor asks, once he has found land and is being interviewed by two investigators who do not credit his tale. According to Lisa Jardine, who chaired this year's Booker judges, Martel has described his novel as one 'that will make you believe in God'. Life of Pi is proud to be a delegate for magic realism, and wears a big badge so that we don't forget it.

  Of course, in a proper paradox, this magical story is made plausible, and vivid and dramatic, only by the careful application of conventional realist techniques. If we do indeed come to believe this story of survival, if we hardly ever feel that our credulity is being taken for a reckless voyage, it is because Martel patiently builds his narrative case: ensuring that no detail is too tiny for examination; quietly folding in a vast amount of research (largely zoological and botanical); taking care to observe the laws of physics and

the natural world; and generally grounding his watery tale in the loam of the likely. Martel proves, by skilful example, that realism is narrative's great master, that it schools even its own truants. He reminds us in fact that realism is already magical, an artifice-in-waiting.

Day 2: Tuesday 12.3 / Wednesday 12.4
- 10 min: Part 1 brainstorming with partners
- 15 min: part 2
- 10 min: Part 3
- 10 min: Part 4
    - Extra time for gathering materials from other spaces around the school if they're allowed?
- Remaining 45 min: work time
    - By end of class, should have research done and plan filled out.
- Last 5 min: Google survey for closure

Day 3: Thursday 12.5 / Friday 12.6
- Work day.
- By 45 min mark: should be working on the final project to show the class.
- Last 5 min: Google survey for closure

Day 4: Monday 12.9
- Presentations!
- 5 min: short intro and thanks for participating
    - Share hope to share findings with DPU and other spaces in the community; they can help me with that
- 35 min: presentations
    - 2 min/ student (or however much time they have depending on # of pairs)
- 5 min: Google survey for closure

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Name _____   Date _____

The Giver Project Day 1: Brainstorm

What common themes came up in the book that interested you most? Choose at least 2 and explain.

How do those themes that most interested you in *The Giver* relate to your own life?

What questions do you still have at the end of the book? Write at least 3.

Forming Your Project

Brainstorming questions (for thinking, not answering):

    What do you think you can add to the conversation we've been having in class?
    How could you start to answer the larger questions that the book raises?
    Do the events of the book mirror real-life events?
    What would you tell other people about this book? Would you recommend it?
    Does the book make you think differently about your society? About yourself?

Driving questions (for answering):
    What do you hope to learn?

    What is your end goal?

    Why is this goal important to you?

    Why will it matter to other people?

    How did you get to the question from the text/ passage?

Name _____   Date _____

Life of Pi Project Day 1: Brainstorm

Which of the top themes interested you the most? Choose 2 and explain.

What questions do you still have?

What else have you been thinking about?

Forming Your Project

Brainstorming questions (for thinking, not answering):

    What do you think you can add to the conversation we've been having in class?
    How could you start to answer the larger questions that the book raises?
    Do the events of the book mirror real-life events?
    What would you tell other people about this book? Would you recommend it?
    Does the book make you think differently about your society? About yourself?

Driving questions (for answering):
    What do you hope to learn?

    What is your end goal?

    Why is this goal important to you?

    Why will it matter to other people?

    How did you get to the question from the text/ passage?

Name _____   Date _____

Day 2: Project Planning

Part 1: What form will this project take?

Dump everything in your brain into this space. Draw, talk to your partner, or write, but put something down.

Part 2: Create a plan. What steps will you need to take to get there?

What do you already know?

What do you need to learn?

What do you need to do?

❏ Step 1:

❏ Step 2:

❏ Step 3:

❏ Step 4:

❏ >

❏ >

❏ >

❏ >

What will your product look like? A poster, a computer slide or presentation, a brochure, a performance, etc.

Part 3: Imagine your audience. Who are they?
What kind of story do you want to tell?

What do you want your audience to experience?

How do you want them to feel coming away from it?

Part 4: Materials list.
What tools do you have already? Think about your medium. (Technology, art supplies, camera, etc)

What tools do you need to get? Is there a place in school that you can go to find them?

Part 5: Research. The real work begins!
By the end of class, you should complete all of the necessary background Research. (Unless you're doing a research project, then you should be halfway done.)

Day 2: Project Planning

Part 1: What form will this project take?

        Dump everything in your brain into this space. Draw, talk to your partner, or write, but put something down.

"Celebrate Our Differences" Day
- *Invite people from the community - put up fliers*
- *People come together with food, clothing, etc.*
- *Workshop on writing about yourself and your identity*
- *I'll create flyers to advertise and if the project goes well I'll talk to people about making it happen*

Part 2: Create a plan. What steps will you need to take to get there?

        What do you already know?

What Jonas' society looks like, what rules they have

What my background looks like and what I would bring to the day

I want to reach a large audience

        What do you need to learn?

What kind of space I would hold it in

Who I would invite to come

How to lead a writing workshop

        What do you need to do?
- ❏ Step 1: *Research how to lead a writing workshop*
- ❏ Step 2: *Research local venues to hold the event*
- ❏ Step 3: *Create a schedule for the day*
- ❏ Step 4: *Create a guide to holding the workshops*
- ❏ *> Step 5: Create flyers for the event on Canva*
- ❏ *> Step 6: Reach out to people I know to see if I could make it possible*

What will your product look like? A poster, a computer slide or presentation, a brochure, a performance, etc.

A schedule for the day, a guide to leading a writing workshop, and a flyer to advertise

Part 3: Imagine your audience. Who are they?
What kind of story do you want to tell?

I want people to appreciate the things that make them different from one another, and think about who they are as people and what role they play in the community. I want them to understand that although our differences make us fight, the world would be awfully boring without them.

What do you want your audience to experience?

I want them to love themselves and their backgrounds, and realize how they can communicate that. I want them to gain confidence and writing skills.

How do you want them to feel coming away from it?

I want them to feel powerful and ready to share their thoughts with the world. I want them to leave thinking about whether or not they value the differences among people, and whether they're living in a way that is loving towards people different from them.

Part 4: Materials list.
What tools do you have already? Think about your medium. (Technology, art supplies, camera, etc)

I can do everything online.

What tools do you need to get? Is there a place in school that you can go to find them?

N/A

Part 5: Research. The real work begins!
By the end of class, you should complete all of the necessary background Research. (Unless you're doing a research project, then you should be halfway done.)

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Example Project Ideas

The Giver example projects
- Make something
    - Board "game of life" where you make choices, then see what happens
    - Imagine your own utopia with resources, rules, inhabitants, etc.
    - Putting lessons learned into an art project
    - Create a social media account or blog to spread information or stories
- Write a fiction piece about something you've discovered
    - Another ending to the book
    - Write from the perspective of another character in the story
    - A poetry collection
    - Travel log of Jonas and Gabe's travels/ their lives once they get to Elsewhere
    - A song or speech
    - Perform a short skit
- Research
    - Real-life events that resemble those in the book
        - Utopias gone wrong/ still existing
            - New Harmony, Indiana
            - Octagon City, Kansas
            - Fordlandia, Brazil
        - Historic dystopias
    - Other utopian/ dystopian fiction
        - The history of the utopia idea/ novel
        - Read about multiple novels and present findings of similarities/ differences
    - Analyze your own society and the utopian/ dystopian parts of it
- Short film/ video project in documentary or narrative style
    - Document your process of reading the novel
    - Cast a mini production of one of the important scenes/ the ending
    - Make a sparknotes-style guide through video

Life of Pi example projects
- Make something
    - Board "game of life" where you make choices, then see what happens
    - Putting lessons learned into an art project
    - Create a social media account or blog to spread information or stories
- Write a fiction piece about something you've discovered
    - Another ending to the book
    - Write from the perspective of another character in the story
    - A poetry collection
    - A song or speech
    - Perform a short skit
    - A collection of newspaper articles about the events of the story
- Research
    - Real-life events resembling those in the book
    - Research one of the religions/ compare multiple religions
    - Navigation or cartography - map Pi's voyage and the ocean currents
    - Psychology - Pi's ailments and possible symptoms (dehydration, starvation, seasickness, grief, etc)
    - Tigers as a symbol in literature, history, culture
- Short film/ video project in documentary or narrative style
    - Document your process of reading the novel
    - Cast a mini production of one of the important scenes/ the ending
    - Make a sparknotes-style guide through video

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